

Kuro no Maou
vol.21 - The War for Spada
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Translation Group: [wn404](#)

Epub: [Trollo WN/LN EPUB](#)

Chapter 397: The Man called Gregorius (1)

At present, the entirety of the Crusader Army that had landed on Pandora were divided into 3 parts.

The First Battalion: led by the Crusaders' Commander in Chief, Sariel, the 7th Apostle, this army was the first to be deployed to Pandora, and boasted 15,000 men. The soldiers that had been lost at the Battle of Goldran Hill had been since replenished by the reserve troops provided by Cardinal Ars.

The Second Battalion: Deployed under the pretext of *reinforcements*, this large army had landed on Pandora soon after Sariel and her First Battalion. The majority of troops within this Second Battalion belonged to Cardinal Mercedes who was well known to be in a power struggle against Cardinal Ars.

The Second Battalion had been left in charge of occupying all the territory on Daidalos aside from its capital since that big achievement had clearly gone to the First Battalion and its Commander in Chief. They had achieved this duty quite smoothly, other than their slight hiccup at one Alzas, a backwater village in the west corner.

And finally, the Third Battalion: this army consisted of the combined troops of many of Sinclair's nobility who were late to deploy, having let Cardinal Mercedes take a step ahead.

So to make things fair this time, the Second Battalion had to let the Third handle the invasion of Daidalos' neighbor: Spada.

Though their plans had been thus belated due to having to deal with the many isolated incidents caused by Daidalos' rebel forces.

But the other day, reports had been circulated that thanks to the First Battalion's Special Forces counter attacking the rebels who had raided Research Institute 4 inside the Medea Ruins, the rebels had suffered a devastating blow and the continuous skirmishes against them had been purged.

Accordingly, the Third Battalion had finally found the time to begin their expedition into Spada. However, winter was soon approaching and many

doubted whether it was wise to deploy such a large army during this time.

Many baseless and unfounded rumors circulated in the Daidalos capital, such as, perhaps this was a ploy by the church where they could conveniently diminish the Third Battalion's forces that were comprised of men provided by the nobility, or perhaps it was that the Earls who led this army were so enchanted by Sariel's beauty and so wanted to make an impression on the Apostle.

"Idiots... idiots the lot of them..."

Tiredly exhaled a man, a lone, middle aged man.

Daidalos. Inside a newly built Cross Church, made for the benefit of immigrants arriving from Sinclair. However, it was built hurriedly and at a desolate location at the corner of the city, a far cry from the large, robust church erected at the Capital's center, it was a small and shabby house of worship. This chapel was so poorly made that the early winter winds had already cooled the air inside to a fair degree.

And it was that very same church that this miserable, middle aged man——one Head Priest Norz, had been left to maintain.

"Argh, Fuck!! If I hadn't met that *Devil* in Alzas, I——"

He roared, knowing there to be nobody else present in the small building with him. He kicked one of the wide benches where the pious sat during worship. In spite of the symbol for their White God, the Cross, displayed openly on the altar, this Head Priest couldn't give a damn about angering God whilst acting on his frustrations.

For a few moments the sound of the bench having been knocked over echoed dryly inside the room. Then came more silence, more miserable silence.

"... Dammit."

Head Priest Norz was a man who, only 6 months ago, had led an occupation regiment of the Second Battalion. Norz's regiment had boasted men in the thousands. The command to such a large part of the army had been granted to him due to his many past accomplishments and experience in the field of battle, in other words, his merit.

His occupation of the Daidalos territory had been progressing as smoothly as any other of the deployed regiments. His adjutant, the woman named Sylvia, had a quick tongue and had further hid the incredible fact that she was the 8th Apostle sent to oversee him, but she hadn't interfered with any of his work. She was very useful in fact.

Everything had been going so well for him. Until that devil appeared, that black-haired devil.

"I didn't deserve this..."

He had failed. Badly. He had allowed countless numbers of his men die to a mere 100 adventurers, and it was only after receiving aid from the 8th Apostle, Ai, and the 11th Apostle, Misa, that they were able to finally, finally... conquer that small, insignificant village.

He couldn't avoid having to take responsibility as the commander, and he couldn't avoid the inevitable demotion.

But it could be said that Norz was a lucky man. The Crusaders had had it easy in their whole invasion but if they hadn't, he was likely to have been not only removed from his position, but executed as well.

He had gotten off with a mere demotion. Not only that, he still maintained his title as Head Priest and even had a church to run. It was almost as if he had been spared from bearing the sin of losing thousands of his subordinates.

That being said, he couldn't simply sit idly knowing that he had been shown mercy. No, Norz had a dream. Or rather, he had desire. A desire for a successful career, a desire for fame and fortune. Even though he wasn't born in nobility, with enough success as a clergyman, he could mete all his desires.

It may sound unseemingly for a man of the cloth to hold such strong desire, but many men who were called Priest had similar inner thoughts. In that meaning, Norz was an ordinary man.

And ordinary men didn't get second chances. Ordinary men had no means to overturn a failure so devastating.

Norz strangely knew. He knew that he'd have to spend the remaining years of

his life in that small church far from his homeland. The Crusader Army may in time conquer the whole of Pandora, but his name would be forever removed from those who led to the achievement. He wouldn't be allowed to be known.

The empty building seemed to represent a prison where he could only rot away.

But that day, someone had opened the door to his desolate cell.

"Helloow there, it's been too long, Head Priest Norz! How haave you been?"

The shoddy door creaked loudly as a single man entered the dim chapel.

"G-Gregorius-sama!?"

The man had a particularly suspicious tone of speaking as he looked at Norz with sly, narrow eyes like that of a fox. His mannerisms might've given the impression that he was an oily swindler but his vestments clearly pointed out his rank as a Bishop of the Cross.

He was unmistakably the man who served as commanding officer of the Second Battalion. Gregorius, the Oracle.

"Myy apologies for visiting ouut of the blue like this, but I figured you muust be bored since practically noo one comes here, aren't you?"

"It is as you say... and what might you need of me today, lord Bishop?"

His head still low, Norz thought to himself, surely this man hadn't come to punish him now, it was much too late for that. He was able to remain calm.

He then gained hope. Even if on a whim, this man had the power to free him from his life of idly rotting away. Which also meant that one word from him and he could be at an even worse position. If he didn't play his cards right here, he might as well be sent to some remote village and be made to play village priest for the new immigrants.

Expectation and dread swirled about in his chest in equal amount. A chest that had gotten thinner along with the rest of his body, likely due to his lack of training in recent months.

"Yees, there've been rumors that the Third Battalion will soon begin their trek to Spada, suurely you know of it?"

“Such rumors have also reached my ears, but are they not simply rumors...?”

In his current station, he had very few means to gather adequate information. With neither aides nor underlings, Norz had fallen beyond low from his once position as commander of thousands of men.

“I seee, it’s goood that you know. To be frank, I’ll be joining the expedition you seee, and I was hoping you’d joooin me——”

“You would have me!?”

“I’m happy to hear your willingness, Head Priest.”

A vile grin crept up along Gregorius’ cheeks. But to Norz, even that seemed to be the holy smile of a Saint.

I am, and have always been a self made man. And given the opportunity to stand in the battlefield, that is when I can truly—— His hope and ambition skyrocketed.

Which was precisely the reaction the sly Bishop was hoping for.

This was a dubious man. He himself paraded his title of ‘Oracle’, and his appearance in itself was questionable at best. He was a man who didn’t hide his suspicious nature, but flaunted it. He was the man called Gregorius.

“I implore you, Lord Bishop, unworthy as I may be, please allow I, Norz, to serve under you!”

“I shall gladly. It’s been somewhat hard recruiting personnel you seee, what with the rigor demanded for the mission this time.”

Norz hadn’t been chosen because of merit, but because others had refused to take the job.

But as far as Norz was concerned, it was the last chance he’d get to realize his ambitions. A chance he had even dismissed as nonexistent.

“Well then, Head Priest Norz, I pray I can count on you?”

“Yes, my Lord Bishop! I hereby swear under God that I will bring you the results you desire!”

Chapter 398: The Man Called Gregorius (2)

Pegasus Knights. Airborne maidens who played the crucial role of a vigilant aerial combat force within the Second Battalion.

Head Priest Norz had once commanded one unit of the Pegasus Knight Corps in his mission to occupy western Daidalos.

Each member of this female exclusive corps were high level knights trained in both the martial and magical arts. They had been widely recognized as a force that distinguished themselves in any battlefield—— that is, before their encounter with the Devil of Alzas. Passing rumors of that battle dared to imply that the pegasus knights were not as infallible as they're made out to be.

Their commander, Norz, had been severely demoted for his failure on that occasion, but the still able bodied pegasus knights hadn't been laid off like their superior, they were much too valuable not to use.

These maidens had since been assigned under another commander, and were continuing to contribute to the occupation effort.

As of late, their duties consisted of suppressing the various rebel movements sprouting up all over Daidalos. These rebels were small in number but their guerrilla attacks were sudden and sporadic, making them a pain to deal with for the various occupying forces deployed all over the country.

And the pegasus knights, with their superior speed granted by air travel, had been perfect for the task. Day and night, they zoomed across the skies, monitoring the various villages and towns and subjugating poorly armed rebels as they found them. On paper, they had been *keeping the peace*, but those elite knights, trained for epic battle, felt that their current duties were but menial chores.

They could see no clear goal nor progress, they piled on more fatigue every day that this went on. Fatigue and frustration.

Even Estelle, still active as their official captain, needed an outlet.

"... Haah." Estelle sighed a truly heavy sigh.

She combed back her long, currently disheveled, hair inside her tent that was in the middle of slowly cooling from the steamy heat that had been generated by its occupants.

To the side of her, on top of thin bed sheets, lay a slender and small boy, sleeping soundly. The boy was naked, like the day he was born. His skin, which Estelle noted was more supple than her own, shone with beads of sweat all over, and his fluffy chestnut hair looked markedly ruffled compared to his usual grooming.

The delicate figure laying with his back exposed gave the striking image of a pagan maiden who had been violated by a foot soldier.

“... Not again.” Estelle dismayed.

This questionable scene had been created by none other than Estelle herself. Though the roles may have been reversed, the fact remained that she had assailed one of the opposite sex.

Her tone indicated that she was in deep regret. Her mind had cleared now that she had expelled all her pent up desire, and she sounded like a girl who promised to maintain her diet plat right after having a three course meal.

“This is bad... I can’t keep doing this...”

Estelle had committed the first of such offenses on the night of the 2nd of First Fire, that is, at a time when the battle in Alzas was yet ongoing.

She had had her eyes on this boy for a long time, from her knights academy days in fact, and on that night, she had worked up the courage to invite him to her tent. Then she worked up her courage to take him then and there.

That being said, he had technically consented.

The first day on that grueling battle at Alzas had generated many losses on the Crusader’s front. They had ended up retreating under the fierce resistance put up by the demons, Estelle’s pegasus knight unit having also suffered harsh losses. Unbelievably, a single, monstrous fairy had eliminated their captain, vice captain, and many good women of the force.

Making use of their dismal situation, Estelle had straightforwardly invited him,

‘Let me get it over with before I die,’ and immediately pushed him down. She had wanted to do better, she really did. But once she had resolved herself to do it, those were the sort of words she said.

She had learned that she wasn’t one to properly convey a confession of love when under stress.

And the situation looking as dire as it was, he had consented even if confused. Really, he did. She remembered him doing so. She had clearly seen him nodding which meant that he consented. Meaning that what she did was certainly not rape, but love making.

All said and done, that was the night Estelle changed her class from maiden to woman.

It was all because of that god forsaken fairy that Estelle had dared to do what she had done. The glowing demon’s powerful telepathy had seeded those ideas into her mind. On the other hand, one could also say that it was thanks to that fairy that she was able to fulfill her love.

But now she had a new problem. In the end, she hadn’t been able to properly convey her feelings and every time she asked, demanded really, he would make a troubled face and oblige her. She knew she was taking advantage of him, using him.

After that one time, she had taken every opportunity... to mete that desire. With their tiresome, seemingly endless missions as of late, they’d been doing the deed almost each night. Actually, today, she had even dragged him into one of the empty village houses in broad daylight. She had to end it mid way though, as she heard her vice captain, Flan, calling after her and she couldn’t really neglect her duty.

She had yet to confess her feelings, and thus couldn’t know how her partner felt. It was like she only desired his body, day in and day out. They were neither lovers, nor friends. Was he not unlike a slave then? She even pondered if maybe hiring a prostitute would be better than the mess of a relationship she was in, at least then the man would get paid his due.

She had realized that this sort of relationship wouldn’t last long. But despite that, she couldn’t bring herself to stop. Perhaps someday, he’d simply run away

from her.

Estelle was scared. She was scared of losing the happiness, the pleasure of having obtained the person she held dear. She was less scared of dying on the field than losing him. She was even less scared of facing that wretched fairy than the prospect of not having him anymore.

And yet, she could only think of forcefully detaining him if he were to try getting away. Really, at this point, how was she going to confess anyway? It was all too late to have the relationship she truly desired.

“Fuck... what was I supposed to do...” she muttered.

Having cooled off, Estelle languidly raised her body.

“Helloow there, paaardon my intrusion, Miss Captain Estelle.”

said a nasal, clearly male voice; the man himself entering her tent while speaking.

“What! Bastard, you have some nerve——”

Estelle promptly covered her exposed upper body with a blanket, and took up her rapier that had been resting at her pillow side. In one swift motion, the tip of the blade had been brandished towards the sudden invader of her private tent.

If this man had been one of the foot soldiers who’d gotten drunk and had foolishly attempted to bed a pegasus knight, he would’ve had her mythril blade deep inside his heart right now.

However, Estelle’s blade didn’t move an inch towards her target.

“You’re—— Bishop Gregorius, my lord...”

“Oh my, did you know of me? Or was it these robes that tipped you off? Matters not, I guess. Captain Estelle, I realize it’s quite late, but I had an offer you might be——”

The man who had turned up all of a sudden and had started speaking to her similarly out of the blue was unmistakably Bishop Gregorius, her superior and commander of the army she and her girls had been currently stationed to.

She had seen him on multiple occasions and, though she wasn't exactly a model student, she was still an academy graduate knight, meaning that she wouldn't mistake a bishop's vestment.

"Oho, would the boy sleeping over there happen to be Rudel-kun? Goodness, that sure saves me the trouble of calling him over."

It was a small tent after all. One could easily make out the presence of the additional person sleeping inside, no matter how small he was.

Crap, this can't be, before Estelle's mind was able to process what was happening, Gregorius was already nudging Rudel on the shoulder to wake him. Rudel being the nude boy sleeping beside her, the boy she loved oh so dearly.

"Nh, uh... Estelle -san?" Rudel mumbled half asleep.

"Oh, apologies Rudel-kun." the bishop said,

"I am unfortunately not the woman who bedded you. But I'd like you to please wake up, I have something very important I'd like you to hear."

Estelle was sweating bullets as she waited for Rudel to flutter open his large, sleepy eyes. He was so cute—— Not, the time. Things were getting out of hand.

"Hwa... uh, huh? Eh?"

Rudel blinked several times as he got a good look at the fox-faced man in front of him.

"And goood morning to you, Rudel-kun" Gregorius greeted, pulling on his words.

"Haa" Rudel yawned, "Good morn——!?"

Which is when he finally realized just who he'd been talking to. Rudel yelped like a little girl while simultaneously prostrating himself before his superior right then and there. Naked and sweaty.

"G-Gregorius-sama... w-what, do you need of me..." Rudel stammered fearfully.

Estelle couldn't see his face as he was currently performing a stiff, naked dogeza on top of the bed sheets, but she could imagine it was much paler than

her own.

Estelle was a knight but Rudel was a man of the cloth. He was currently serving the army as a Priest, in other words, a healer, but his original job was that of a priest who served the church. While Estelle was more on the military side of things, for Rudel the bishop was his superior in both jobs, which put him in a precarious position to say the least.

“Riight, this is a bit important, so I just had to tell you right away. I do apologize for intruding on your fun, but I’ll try not take up too much of your time. Please feel free to continue where you left off once I’m done, or rest up for tomorrow, whatever you want.”

The rather inappropriate joke on the bishop’s part had served to inform the couple that he was well aware of what had recently occurred inside the tent. Rather, they’d think him bizarre if he hadn’t come to that conclusion upon seeing a naked man and woman in bed together.

In other words, they could make no excuse.

Had this Gregorius come here to deal punishment to the pegasus knight and priest engaging in illicit acts? Everyone knew the church didn’t allow for carnal relationships out of marriage, and same-sex relationships were banned outright. Basically, obscenities were judged very harshly, and any perpetrators were sure to receive due punishment.

But that’s no business of a bishop. This sleazebag just wanted to get some kicks from this I’ll bet, Estelle cursed the man in her heart but kept her comments to herself.

She had meant to exercise caution when engaging in their nightly liaisons but now that it was so easily discovered, she supposed it’d spell the end of that. She’d accept whatever punishment came her way, but she had to at least try and lessen the punishment for her beloved Rudel, even if a little.

Rudel, in spite of his young age, had risen from deacon to priest. Estelle wasn’t very savvy on how promotions worked on the church’s side, but she at least knew that they didn’t make just anyone a priest, especially someone still in their teens. She wondered if Rudel had the potential to become even more elite than herself, one of the respected pegasus knights.

But that didn't matter right now. She had to do everything in her power to not ruin Rudel's clean record. She suspected that he hated her already, and she didn't want that to escalate. If that kind boy rejected her outright after this, she couldn't go on.

"W-wait..." She ventured.

But alas, Estelle wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed and that facet had become her worst enemy at this moment. She could think up nothing, nothing at all to his defense.

Thus, while she had managed to stammer out a word, no others followed, and she went silent.

But, there has to be something, something— as she kept drawing blanks, someone else took the initiative.

"M-my utmost apologies, lord bishop... I am to blame, for all of this."

"Rudel!? What—"

Young Rudel's bold confession caused Estelle to cry out shocked. The bishop, raising one hand, put on a lecherous grin as he tried to calm the two.

"Oho, so Rudel-kun, you say you're to blame?" Gregorius questioned.

"Yes, I am the one who assaulted Captain Estelle."

Rudel claimed, his voice shaking as if he'd started crying already.

"So you say that you, a frail healer, managed to have your way with a pegasus knight, an elite warrior, and with their captain no less?"

"Yes."

"Care to tell me how?"

"Well, I... uhm, I was... very forceful..."

If that were true, Rudel would have had no place being a Priest. If he truly had the muscle and mettle to take on Estelle, a knight adept in the usage of Force Boost and a number of other self-strengthening martial skills, he would've been designated a post among the Armored Knight Corps already.

But it didn't matter how completely blatant a lie he had made up just now.

The fact stood that he had lied of his own will. In other words, he had tried to defend Estelle's honor.

"Right, of course you did" Gregorius said, nonplussed.

"Yes I have. So I beseech you, lord bishop, captain Estelle has done nothing wrong—"

"Alright, sure, sure." Gregorius quickly waved off,

"Now, onto the main topic. I actually came here to prospect a new mission for the two of you—"

"Eh?" shot both Estelle and Rudel at the abrupt change in topic.

"What's the matter? Did you not understand something?"

"No, not that..." Estelle began,

"Was that really all you had to say seeing us like this?"

Rudel looked alarmingly depressed as his courageous plea in favor of Estelle had been so swiftly ignored, so the pegasus knight queried the bishop as to his intentions.

"Hahaa," laughed said bishop,

"I've seen the sort happening countless times in our army! Oh, and of course, I can swear to God to keep this matter a secret, please be at ease."

"What in the world..." Estelle was frankly bewildered at the easygoing answer.

Gregorius put on a smile as if to say that he completely understood and sympathized with their happenstances, and although she still saw him as suspicious, she nonetheless understood that he was seriously saying he'd overlook the matter.

"U-uhm, lord bishop..." Rudel ventured timidly, "would you do that...?"

Gregorius put on his clergyman smile and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder as he still sat there prostrated.

"Of course I will, Rudel-kun," said the bishop,

"After all, it is the duty of priests of the Cross to tend to the fatigued knights

after their day's battles."

Faith may be different depending on the individual, but all present here were adherents of the Cross faith. So the bishop acted to appease the worrying priest that yes, according to their Lord, it was well within their duties to ease the hearts of tired soldiers.

"Depending on the circumstances, one may also need to use their body to perform this duty."

Gregorius sermoned,

"Well, not many would go that far... but if you've done it with love, I'm certain the Lord will give you His blessing."

"Lord Bishop..." Rudel was stunned, "Thank you, lord bishop!"

"Rudel-kun, you are truly blessed," Gregorius continued,

"Be sure to thank the Lord for the bond you're able to share with such a beautiful lady. Why back in my day, I had to spend the nights accompanying the armored knights you know? They were not gentle let me tell you."

"Uhh, too much information..." Estelle cringed at having been revealed to the bishop's somewhat sodomistic past.

She had no interest to learn of such things and sincerely wished that it remained a private affair.

"Now then, I believe that should soothe your worries. Can I get to what I came here for then?"

Estelle wanted to get dressed first, but she abstained from needlessly prodding the situation even more. She didn't want to dig up a settled matter.

It might've been rude to face a bishop with nothing but a blanket covering her privates, but since he didn't look bothered by it, she decided to do the same.

"Yes sir, lord bishop" Estelle said in a serious tone, formally addressing the highest rank officer in all the occupation forces deployed over Daidalos.

"At ease, soldier." Gregorius said carefreely,

"This is a strictly voluntary mission I should add. If possible I'd like you to

recommend yourself for the post.”

Estelle guessed that it must be an especially challenging mission if people hadn't gathered to a bishop's call to arms. Why else would he have come here to this remote region she'd been deployed to?

“So you say I have the right to refuse?” Estelle asked.

“Indeed you do,” Gregorius confirmed, “you may refuse if you wish.”

That made it simple. Her answer was of course: No. Her current happiness may be a fleeting, temporary thing, but she wanted remain bedding Rudel for as long as she possibly could.

“However, Captain Estelle,” Gregorius appealed,

“I believe that accepting this mission will be of great merit to yourself.”

“I see...” Estelle said, not sure where this was going, “I suppose that means a bonus in my salary?”

“I will approve your engagement to Rudel-kun.” the sly bishop began

“And once this mission is over, I'll make it so that you two can return to Sinclair to have a grand ceremony. I'll be sure to oversee your vows myself, of course. What do you think? Having your marriage done under a bishop is an experience usually only nobles can afford, no? I'm sure you find the prospect too appealing to resist.”

Estelle was perplexed. She couldn't understand what this man was saying.

Glancing beside her, Rudel had a similar confusion to his face. She inferred that the bishop hadn't said anything to him either.

“W-wait... what are you talking about?” Estelle quickly asked for clarification, confused yes, but also expectant.

“Rudel-kun here is an orphan you see. He's grown up in the church all his life, in other words, I have the final say over who he'd to be engaged to.”

Gregorius explained,

“Well, it's not as strict as with nobility and their arranged marriages, but he does have the position of priest now, so if I order it, he won't be able to refuse

that partner, whomever it may be— — oops, let me correct myself. The partner that I, a bishop, chooses for him will surely be the one he's fated to be bonded to, is the fact of the matter."

The Cross faith didn't require celibacy for its nuns and clergymen. Though it was limited to monogamy, their Lord would surely give His blessings to two who are truly in love. God wanted his men of the cloth to live modest and frugal lives, but He had no issue with them making offspring.

'Be fruitful and multiply,' God has said. It was a well known line for churchgoers. Incidentally, this line continues, 'and fill the earth and subdue it and vanquish any and all evil.'

This sort of line of scripture had had many interpretations from ancient times to present day, but for Estelle, right now, it meant that she had a chance to be bonded in holy matrimony with her beloved Rudel. It meant that even a despicable woman like her had a chance.

And the bishop before her had the power to enact it. And it was this control that gave her a guarantee that his promise was indeed a possibility.

"... Surely you jest, sir." but Estelle couldn't say Yes just yet. She had just barely held back the utterance.

Rudel had tried to defend her. Perhaps, perhaps he also held an affection for her as she did for him. She wanted to believe that, desperately.

If she so easily accepted this offer, she risked betraying that bond. That was something she had to avoid.

"Mmm," Gregorius sighed,

"and here I thought it was a good proposal. Looks like I was wrong. My sincerest apologies you two... anyway, since you don't seem to be as close as I imagine, I suppose I'll have to move along to the subject of reassignments."

"W-wait," Estelle stammered,

"please wait, sir. By reassignment, you don't mean— —"

"I'm sure you've heard." Gregorius detailed,

"The Third Battalion will soon begin their advance towards Spada, and I was

thinking I wanted to extend a friendly gesture to Count Belgrunt by sending in some reinforcements.”

Including Estelle and her unit of pegasus knights, Rudel and the other Priests in the recovery corps, and a large number of foot soldiers would be redeployed. However, while Estelle and her girls would surely be fighting at the front lines, to capture Galahad Fortress, Rudel would be stationed far back in the rear along with the other healers.

This meant that, until they captured the fortress, she’d be separated from him.

“I’ll have you know, I take to assigning my human resources very diligently.”

Gregorius stated,

“I put people who get along together, and separate them if they’re the opposite. One must have synergy to work in an army after all.”

Estelle couldn’t give a damn about this bishop’s personal philosophy.

She had just learned that she might have to say farewell to Rudel as early as tomorrow. That, she couldn’t allow.

“But there’s a limit to what I can do for people not under my own command you see,”

Gregorius said, apologetically,

“so unfortunately, you two will be required to go to separate posts——”

“Please wait, sir,” Estelle cut him off,

“if I were to accept your mission, I request Rudel be made my exclusive aide.”

“Done.” the bishop easily assented,

“I trust that you two lovebirds will work much better if you’re together. I’m expecting good things, Captain.”

“... Fine, I accept.” Estelle said, and then corrected herself, “No, let me volunteer myself.”

This was the only path left to her. Gregorius held the leash to the man she so desperately wanted. But that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. If she performed

well, things would go smoothly in the direction she desired. This prospect was better than any monetary reward. One couldn't buy love after all.

"Oh! Excellent reply, Captain Estelle! I'm glad to have you."

Gregorius exclaimed needlessly, to which Estelle followed up with a
"It's my honor as a knight,"
playing along for her part.

"Good on you, Rudel-kun," Gregorius now addressed Rudel,

"From here on, be sure to support your lovely Captain both in public and private matters."

"Uh... um...." Rudel deliberated.

"You're her fiance now, right?"

"Y-yes, lord bishop..."

He looked troubled with the sudden turn of events, but even with his delicate brows turned up, he consented to his superior. This clearly demonstrated the bishop's influence over the boy, proving how he had the power to decide whom the young priest could love.

"As for you, Captain," Gregorius returned to Estelle,

"I need you to pick out 4 to 5 of your unit who will be accompanying us."

"Yes, sir."

"You are to head to Fort Alzas and await further orders from there."

Bishop Gregorius gave her a few more miscellaneous directives, and after he was done, Estelle finally asked the most important question,

"Sir, if I may ask, what exactly is our objective for this mission?"

"Oops, dear me." Gregorius cried, "I can't believe I forgot, pardon me will you?"

Did he really forget? Estelle couldn't tell since his fox-like face always seemed to be scheming something or other. But the bishop apparently had no reason to conceal the matter and he told her easily:

“While the Third Battalion is keeping Galahad occupied, we will be clandestinely invading the heart of Pandora: the city-state of Avalon——”

Chapter 399: Gladiator

I returned to Spada at the turn of the new year, that is, right around when the date became the 1st of Gloom, this world's equivalent of January.

Merry, being the Nightmare she was, needed neither rest nor sleep, and I had ridden her all the way back without a single pause. I had traveled straight from Asbel, across the border and entered into Spada proper in 6 and a half days, just over half the 12 days it had taken us to get there.

In the time we were out subjugating the Lust Rose, winter had settled into the city. It had been around 3 weeks since I was last here and there was already a thin layer of snow covering the streets and roads. It was snowing tonight.

I would've arrived a day, or at least half a day faster if the highways hadn't been so buried in snow... but let's not dwell on the past.

That aside, the only reason I was able to shorten the time this much was because it was only me and Merry who had made the journey, that is to say, I'd left Lily and Fiona behind... actually, they had noticed my sense of urgency and even encouraged me to go ahead. I was extremely grateful to have such understanding party members.

Now then, since the enemy had finally made their move, let's get down to business.

"I read the letter." I said,

"But I had to hear the details ASAP... tell me, how close are they?"

"Now now, do calm yourself, Kurono, my bosom friend."

Will returned, his words as exaggerated as ever, but with a sober expression and serious tone.

Him and I were currently seated at the lounge of my dormhouse.

"You best have a cup of tea before we begin," Will advised,

"You've traveled night and day to arrive, do have some and warm yourself."

Seria, Will's guard maid was accompanying him of course. The steaming tea

she had brewed sat on the table between us, letting off a relaxing fragrance.

Maybe it was because of that that I was calm and didn't lash out yelling that this was no time for tea.

Right, first, I had to clear my head. Will was a friend who believed in me, and so he understood more than anyone in Spada, the menace that were the Crusaders.

"... Thanks, Will." I said after a sip of the tea.

It really did calm the searing agitation in my heart, even if slightly.

"I mind not. Your ability to appease yourself like this only proves your strength of heart."

"Huh... and uh, sorry for calling you here so late at night."

"Ha ha ha. Once again, I mind not!"

It was all thanks to Will's preparation and foresight that I was able to meet with him to discuss details as soon as I arrived.

When I burst through Spada's main gates, just as rashly as I had once done bursting out of those gates to head to Alzas, Seria had been already ready and waiting.

It was impossible for me to know how she knew I was coming or how long she had been waiting there, but thanks to that, in no time, Will was able to know that I had arrived. Will was, as always, staying in the elite boys' dormitories, and it was only a 5 minute walk away to our dorm.

That being said, it was only because Will was so efficient in what he did that he was able to prepare anything and everything in under an hour after I stepped through the gates.

"Well then," Will started,

"first comes the topic of their numbers, I suppose."

I nodded, prompting him to continue.

"At the current stage, it appears that their main forces have not left Fort Alzas yet."

But seeing how I received that personal letter, I couldn't imagine Spada jumping to any false conclusions. But if the Crusaders weren't using their main army, how were they able to determine that the enemy were advancing?

"They've begun thawing the snow. By that I mean, the transnational highway through the Galahad Mountains, the only route that connects our country to Daidalos."

The cage of winter had deterred road travel in Spada and Daidalos alike.

But geographically, it was likely that winter had hit Daidalos even harder than here. It was like the difference in snowfall between Japan's west, and pacific sides. The tall mountainous region of Galahad mostly blocked the wind and snowclouds.

"Despite now being a time when the snow would easily render the route impassable, the Crusaders have been laboriously opening up that highway for some time now."

Will explained

.

Sounded like a long process.

Will further explained that they were using a variant species of dortus, those mammoth-like monsters, which had ice attribute extra magic, and worked them as snowplows. They also employed a number of cryomancers who could do the same and pyromancers who could use heat to melt the snow and ice. Even the Crusaders couldn't afford to let their soldiers freeze by trudging through the deep snow.

One of Spada's top class Summoners stationed in Galahad Fortress had been using a bird familiar, 'servants' as they're called, to perform recon and surveillance over enemy activities. Will told me that the summoner had directly seen them removing the snow so there was no risk of false reports.

"So can't we go and crush their snow removers now?"

I suggested.

"No," Will denied,

“quite unfortunate, but we cannot. For two simple reasons.”

The first was definitely because we would have to deal with the snow on the Spada side too.

Even the Crusaders with their huge armies couldn't march their armies through snow that thick, so obviously Spada would have to do the same from the other end to march theirs. Thinking on it, it was simply bad strategy.

“The second of which has to do with foreign relations.”

Will said.

“Avalon and the other territories would not stand idly if Spada were to proactively invade Daidalos land.”

I knew that Spada was only one of the powerful city-states that ruled Pandora from back when I was a novice adventurer in Irz. And these different nations had maintained peace thus far only because they had tied alliances to one another.

As it was well known that the late Dragon King Garvinal enterprised to conquer the whole of the continent, the city-states had had a natural common enemy to join arms against. In a state of intermittent war, it was easier to maintain peace.

But Garnival had fallen, and this unknown enemy by the name of Crusaders now ruled over Daidalos. This had caused lots of headache among the allied city-states' leadership on how exactly they were to deal with their new foe to the west.

“In my opinion, they're only wasting time doing all these meetings when they should be dealing with the threat immediately.”

I spoke frankly.

“But alas,” Will dismayed,

“They feel not the looming danger as we do, and likely won't until arrows are fired.”

Will went as far as to say that Avalon was too used to peacetime which was the main reason for the delayed response... anyway, there was no use blaming

the alliance at this point.

“So you’re saying we just wait?” I questioned. “Do nothing as they get closer every day?”

“Oh? But it might not be as bad as you think,” Will claimed,

“They are, after all, heading straight towards our impregnable Galahad Fortress, where we will be ready and waiting.”

In other words, the enemy would need to face Spada from behind their greatest line of defense. There was no reason not to make use of a fortress that would give Spada their biggest advantage.

Meaning that protecting Galahad would be the best course of action Spada could take. The Crusader’s couldn’t reach the capital without first overcoming the fortress boasted at impregnable. Well, they could, but that would involve taking a much longer route around the mountains, or sending in air units.

“That’s, a good point...” I muttered, more convincing myself that I didn’t need to rush, than agreeing with Will’s point.

This was, after all, not Alzas.

“So how long are they estimating the Crusaders will take getting there?”

I asked.

“Indeed, at this pace,” Will thought,

“it would surely take a month’s time. They may hasten the process, but it’d be impossible to reach Galahad in fewer than 2 weeks.”

The Crusaders would be launching an invasion into a whole nation, so the forces they’d deploy should be several times larger than what they had sent to Alzas.

This may be obvious to hear, but the more soldiers there are, the more time it takes to displace them. Moving armies numbering in the tens or hundred thousands would require immense time and resources. Even in our effort to evacuate the villagers from Alzas, we had to keep the Crusader’s at bay for a whole week at the very least. And that was only around 10,000 soldiers, while the main armies would number much higher.

In addition, the highway was frigid and piled in snow. The armies wouldn't have sick, elderly or children to take care of, but everything considered, there really was no way for them to make it there any earlier than 2 weeks.

I could only pray there to be an avalanche that killed them all... No, too much optimism is dangerous. I might as well expect the worst, for example, a new Apostle appears and happens to have the unworldly power to transport their whole army to the base of Galahad Fortress as quick as tomorrow.

Uh, no, please tell me there isn't an Apostle like that, there isn't right...?

"I wanted to ask," I said,

"once we gather our main forces over at the fortress, who's going to protect this place (Spada)?"

The Apostle might not be able to bring an entire army, but there was a big chance that they could teleport themselves, or even a small, elite group and invade the city itself.

I based this assumption on the fact that we had had a similar experience before when the 11th Apostle, Misa, had somehow passed our defensive line and massacred the villagers. Now that I think about it, we still had no idea how she did that. There's always the chance that she used a teleportation skill.

"But of course we have minimal defenses set up for the city itself..."

Will explained

,

"In wartime, there are occasions where the enemy sneaks into towns in few numbers. We have countermeasures set up to deal with a certain degree of such rabble, so you need not worry."

Oh, of course they'd have measures in place. Otherwise they'd be helpless against information leaking via foreign spies or terrorist activities.

I mean, it was a functioning country after all. They had to have put proper thought and measures for stuff like that.

"Again, you, Kurono, have no need to worry about matters concerning our foreign affairs. You need simply to focus your attention on the encroaching

enemy.”

Somehow, it felt like we’d come full circle, back to whether Spada could beat the Crusaders.

No, even if our army was weaker, we had to win. What reason did I obtain all my strength, my divine protections, for if not to win?

“Got it, Will. So where do I fight?”

“You make haste, Kurono.” Will remonstrated me, but his lips had crept into a fearless grin.

“It is not yet time to set out for Galahad.” He continued,

“I need not tell you that you need to first make preparations, do I?”

Right, of course. Not only did I need to prepare, but Lily and Fiona weren’t back either. The three of us made Element Masters, and if I was alone, I’d barely make a third of our combined potential.

“Very soon, Spada will switch over to war footing, and the adventurer’s guild will be putting up an emergency quest to aid the war.”

Will said, informing me of the country’s plans.

Which reminds me, all this time, there had been no public announcement about the fall of Daidalos and about its new Crusader rule.

The main reason for this being the existence of the Crusaders themselves, a never before seen force that showed no sign of replying to their attempts at making contact. Basically, even if they tried to inform the public, there wasn’t much to say.

But now that an army was headed our way, the country had no choice but to consider them an enemy. Maybe, in the background, Spada had tried their best to maintain peace with them, but the other side had now compelled us to fight.

“Emergency quest? Do you mean they’ll force all the adventurers in Spada to join the war?”

“Not exactly, when emergency quests involve national war, forced participation is more lenient.”

Basically, an adventurer could refuse if they paid the cancel fee, which is lowered in this case.

An emergency quest is ordinarily not something one can refuse so easily. It's seen as something like a duty that every adventurer must perform, and so the cancellation fee is usually pretty steep.

But then, wouldn't a national emergency like war cause the cancel fee to hit the roof? Not quite, as it turns out.

"Many adventurers hail from other lands after all."

Will explained

"And since they cannot be considered as belonging to our nation, we cannot exactly enforce conscripting them."

The country isn't so much concerned with the freedom of adventurers as the backlash they'd likely receive from their allied countries, so it'd be a quest they wouldn't force too much. And the guild couldn't force adventurers to comply from their end either.

Though, there's still the possibility of them getting conscripted anyway if they're Spada born.

"Well, we aren't planning to refuse in the first place."

It was actually a relief to hear that we could participate in the war just by taking on a quest. It'd be like just another monster hunting quest, except this time, we'll be crushing the slimy devils that only looked human from the outside.

"Indeed. And to incorporate those adventures that do join the effort, our army will form a new regiment to accommodate. It will be the 4th Spadan Regiment, Gladiator."

Apparently, it's named Gladiator as an homage to the fierce warriors who had fought in the founding of Spada.

And as a cultural heritage, even today there exist professional gladiators who are technically adventurers, but work as a mercenary corps that help defend the nation much like knights.

“Kurono, you will also be a member of Gladiator, on paper that is.”

“... what do you mean ‘on paper’?”

“In practical terms, you Element Masters will have freedom to move as you wish in the battlefield, something like a small raid force. I shall request my father Leonhart for this, nay, I promise to you that I will convince him!”

Will proclaimed, tightly gripping his fist.

This sort of stuff... yeah, it’s a little too awkward to honestly appreciate.

“I don’t know, receiving special treatment like that...”

I said doubtfully,

“is that really alright from the army’s standpoint?”

“What’s there to worry? It isn’t as if we’re giving you the authority of a knight. It simply means that you can wreak as much havoc as you desire without having to fall in line.”

He wasn’t wrong there. It’d be annoying if we were to fall under some hard headed boss who made us go along with his orders.

But then again, going too independent might bring danger to the army as a whole. I mean, Will even has personal experience on that.

“That being said, most of Gladiator will be split into small raid squads regardless.”

Will said.

“They are adventurers, so it’s foolish to expect the discipline of knights.”

“But we’re defending the fortress, right? We can’t just open the gates and rush out, can we?”

“That no, but there is no rule against going after the enemies that climb up our walls.”

Okay, you can stop looking at me all starry eyed as if to say I’ll definitely run off like that. I’ll have you know, I’m the type that focuses on defense more than offense. It’s what I did back in Alzas, blackened the guild house and mostly stayed put inside.

“Moreover, it’s certainly not just you. Other rank 5 parties would also receive this privilege.”

Probably because you tend to get some crazy strong folks among rank 5 adventurers. It’s not a good idea to expect those types to fall in line, but rather, leave them to do their own thing and they’d kill lots of enemies all the same.

“Hold on. You do realize that I’m not so insane as to ignore our side of the army when we’re fighting a war together, right?”

“You’re not? And here I believed you were a berserker.”

“I’m completely sane, alright!? Also, please get it in your head already, I’m a black mage!”

“Eh? You are? Did you not declare yourself the Nightmare Berserker, the mad ravager of darkness?”

“No I didn’t! You did, Will! You’re the one who keeps calling me that!!”

Oho, really now~? Will went, looking honestly confused. I’d like to give him a good smack on the face.

Although, I’ve heard that back in Iskia, Nell of all people had slapped him so hard that his monocle cracked and flew off, so in light of that harsh misfortune, I forgave him this time.

“To repeat my point, you need not show any reserve. All of Spada knows just how strong you Element Masters are and so accept this as a right you rank 5 adventurers have earned.”

If Will says so then I didn’t need to worry about it. In that case it isn’t awkward anymore but simply something to appreciate.

“In other words, we need to get our things in order and make preparations until they call us to enter the regiment.”

Ah, it’s great that we’re actually getting time to get ready this time around.

In all honesty, I wish I had enough time to finish receiving the rest of my divine protections, but the Crusaders weren’t going to make it that convenient. That, I’ve known for a long time.

I now had 4 out of the 7, more than half. Here's to hoping it's enough.

"Aside from that, Kurono, I happen to hear on the grape vine that you've prepared something truly outrageous in anticipation for this war——"

Neither Lily nor Fiona were the type to leak information of our secret weapon, formation Anticross. Which left... Simon, I guess.

Oh well, there's no harm letting Will know too. In fact, I should take this opportunity to properly explain it to him.

"Sure, I'll tell you all about it." I said.

"This is something we developed to beat the Apostles, no, to beat a certain 7th Apostle, Sariel."

This is something we came up with close to 2 months ago.

We had returned from Iskia, received the royal decoration and attained rank 5 status. Soon after, Fiona picked out a lich subjugation quest to use for practicing our divine protections, and the day after, on the 10th of Blue Moon——

Chapter 400: Anti-Sariel Battle Plan

On the night of the 10th of Blue Moon, when we, Element Masters, had finally hammered out the details of Formation Anticross.

“Hey Kurono,” Lily began. It was right after dinner and the three of us were relaxing at the lounge. “There’s something I want to run by you.”

She was currently in our academy uniform, with an appearance no different from a cute 1st grader, but her mind had switched to adult mode, and her expression made it clear that she was about to discuss something very serious.

“Alright, go ahead.” I said.

“Ah, hold on please— nom nom,” Fiona, who had been endlessly emptying plates of dessert, hurriedly finished up the last of her apple pie. Even she wasn’t so easygoing as to continue munching away during this sort of important discussion. “... Ng, all done, go ahead.”

The action itself may sound considerate, but with her cheeks stuffed like a fluffy hamster’s, it really looked like she was fooling around.

Oh well, with Fiona now ready to listen, (Simon was on a quest with Sofi, the mysterious female adventurer) the small dorm house consisted of only party members and we could thus discuss our matters without reserve.

So without further ado, Lily dropped it on us— “I’ve figured out how we can beat Sariel.”

“You whaaaat!?” I yelled. Talk about overreaction. Was that really necessary?

“This is still only insurance in the case that Anticross fails to kill her. Think of it as our plan B.” Lily continued, quickly bringing my tension down. It’d be a lie to say I wasn’t expecting something huge. Still, it was better to have a plan B than not.

“If you’re saying we need one to kill that *monster*,” I said, referring to the white apostle, “I’m down for any number of plans.”

“Fufu, thanks Kurono,” Lily smiled with a faint satisfaction, “I really appreciate

that part about you.”

She returned to the explanation,

“First off, I should mention that this plan will only work on Sariel. In other words, it does not apply to any of the other apostles.”

By which, was she saying she found a weakness exclusive to Sariel?

I’d faced her twice so far, and I hadn’t seen anything even resembling a weakness. Honestly, it even felt like we’d have an easier time beating Ai, the 8th apostle, or Misa, the 12th.

Those two, now that I think back on it, seemed unusually casual. They had given off neither the rigidity of knights nor the battle hardness of warriors.

Yet, they were powerful all the same. Ai’s mystery Lux Sagitta, enchanted with Ai-ther (whatever that is) had easily defeated both me and Lily, and Misa had single handedly murdered close to 10,000 villagers who were guarded by Vulcan and many strong adventurers.

But that only meant that faced with an enemy of equal power, they wouldn’t be able to maintain their nonchalant cool. Meaning, they could be psychologically cornered.

Sariel on the other hand, stayed completely emotionless, giving her the advantage of utilizing 100% of her battle potential no matter how strong the enemy.

So what could this exclusive weakness even be? Rather than asking that, I simply listened to Lily continue. She’d get to it eventually.

“Now, the basic premise of this plan is simple——” Lily paused.

I gulped audibly due to the tense atmosphere. Fiona though, she looked sleepy like always. As if this particular reveal had been spoiled to her already...

“—— We need to break Sariel’s Mind Protect.”

In other words, what...? I was sort of confused, but then I remembered something,

“... Which reminds me, Lily, didn’t you say you tried to attack with your

Telepathy when the two of us fought her?”

It was when I had the misfortune of having to meet Sariel for a 2nd time, resulting in the battle on top of Daidalos’ city walls.

I had recklessly attempted to beat her using the Basilisk’s Needlebone that I had hidden away, but she was quickly able to overcome even that. I can still vividly remember that fight.

Then, after she knocked me unconscious, Lily had to use her trump card, Life Drain, to transform into her true form only to carry me and escape.

“I did. Back then, I thought that her mind was only protected by a simple barrier spell.”

Or right, when I heard that Lily had even attempted hacking into that emotionless apostle, I distinctly remember not feeling creeped out in the least. In fact, I only thought that Lily was even more amazing to pull off a Telepathy attack in the middle of all that chaos.

And now, Lily was saying that she had uncovered the mystery behind that powerful Mind Protect.

“That there wasn’t your ordinary countermeasure against mind reading magic like Telepathy, or anything else in the Illusion school. It was definitely a seal put on her memories.”

Stuff like sealed memories might sound like something out of a chuunibyou’s notebook—— and I’d be thinking that too, ordinarily. But, subconsciously, instinctively, just hearing about it gave me intense shivers along with hair-raising goosebumps. My whole body reacted with an absolute aversion to the very concept.

“A memory, seal... no...”

“Yes, I know it’s a sensitive subject for you, Kurono.”

Lily revealed.

“That’s why I didn’t mention it... until now that is. But there’s no choice anymore, it won’t be long until the Crusaders attack.”

She made the right choice telling me. I knew that.

But yet, there was still this violent turbulence in the depth of my heart, and I was completely powerless to stop it.

“By memory seal, I’m saying that it’s the same thing that you were made to go through by the White Sacrament.”

Memories of my family, dumb conversations with friends, awkward, self-conscious moments alone with that girl I liked. My days of peace were slowly, surely, being sent to a place where I could never reach them. I could still vaguely remember myself going down that path.

And if back then, by some coincidence, accident, or whatever, if I hadn’t woken up from it, what would I—

“Kurono, everything alright?” Lily asked, concerned.

“Yeah, don’t worry... I’m fine.”

It was a painful, traumatic experience, but I wasn’t about to give in to that now.

If gouging into my trauma is the only way to beat that apostle, then bring it on, I can take it in full stride.

“Right, makes sense...” I said again after a moment,

“so her memories weren’t erased, but only sealed.”

“White Sacrament, in other words, the people who experimented on you have one goal.” Lily continued.

“That is, to make a fully autonomous doll. And one step in making such a puppet that intelligently moved to their will was to seal away the parts they didn’t need. Their memories.”

The evil bastards were treating memories like a removable piece.

“Then again, it’s thanks to that very fact that our Kurono-san still maintains his memories today.”

Fiona commented.

“That’d be the silver lining...” I began, and then realized, “wait, Fiona, you knew?”

Fiona's mouth flapped open and closed without words and I could almost hear her going *ah, crap*.

"No, I'm not blaming you. In fact, I should thank you for being considerate for me."

"Oh, no... it was nothing, really..." I couldn't tell if she was being nervous or shy, but it was cute.

"That, aside." Lily, rather forcefully, brought us back on topic. She looked positively miffed; wonder why?

"The fact of the matter is that Sariel's memories are still sealed somewhere in that head of hers!"

"Huh, doesn't that mean she's like me, summoned from another world?"

That'd be one hell of a shocking revelation. But the idea was immediately, and unanimously denied by every member of the council making the decisions in my head.

I know for a fact that no Japanese girl looks like her. Sariel had the features of a French bisque doll, the difference is literally glaring compared to Shirasaki-san, the ideal (and my ideal) Japanese beauty.

"I can't say if she hasn't undergone similar experiments, but she isn't from a foreign world."

Right, of course she isn't, and Lily denied it instantly too. Still, she's went through the same experiments as me...

"Back in the Republic," Fiona added,

"there'd been rumors how the 7th Apostle is an artificial Apostle created by a top-secret organization within the church."

"Now that... I didn't know."

"I thought of it as mere rumor too, of course. After all, gossip and hearsay concerning Apostles rivaled the number of stars in the sky."

And under the premise of Lily's conclusions, one could say that that particular rumor had some inkling of truth to it.

“And the rumors about her didn’t end there.” Fiona recounted stories from her homeland.

“Some said she was a being from a foreign realm like yourself. While others argued she could be a slave, or even a pagan devout captured from one of the colonies. The most likely case was that she was one of Sinclair’s many orphans, without home or family, but it seems that too isn’t quite correct.”

Then what? Just what could Sariel possibly be? The question was on my tongue as Lily put forth the answer: “She’s a homunculus.”

“You mean, like the ones found in ancient ruins...?”

Artificial lifeforms, imitation humans manufactured through the use of ancient over-technology.

Then again, this world had beastkin and vampires, and even talking goblins and golems. At this point, even if I don’t see it, I can accept most things simply being a thing here just by thinking *that’s how it is*.

“No wait, Lily, weren’t those Servants of yours also homunculi?”

“Yes, they are indeed——” Lily’s small hand made a quick circle in the air, and instantly, a brilliant magic circle appeared inside the lounge, “Come out, Eins, Zwei.”

Lily’s so-called Servants, the ones that carried in the large bed some days ago, came out of the gleaming doorway. The tall, wide-shouldered figures had the same appearance I remembered, black overcoat and iron masks with smiley faces drawn on.

“Reveal your faces to your Lord.” receiving their master’s order which they took as absolute and without question, the two servants each immediately raised a black, leather gloved hand and proceeded to take off their iron masks.

And under there, the sight that awaited me was——

“Huh? They’re exactly the same.”

They had chiseled, male faces of the Western variety. But however realistic they looked, they gave me the same impression as dressed up mannequins inside clothing stores.

Their white faces and red eyes, completely devoid of emotion, reminded me only of Sarii. Due to their coats, whose hoods they wore low over their eyes, I couldn't see the top of their heads, but from the few strands of hair I could glimpse at peeking from the front of their ears, I could ascertain that that too was the same white as the 7th Apostle's.

Two of these faces stood before us like twins, no, they could very well be mass produced.

"Apparently, most homunculi that are dug up from ruins tend to share these albino features, bleached skin and hair, and red eyes."

Lily explained. I seemed to remember hearing something similar at the academy too.

"I believe Fiona told you about them before. I have nine of these Living Dead under my control. All of them share the same form, that is to say, they're all homunculi."

Makes sense. I could sense life force from these Servants not only because they were homunculi, but also because they'd been processed through Lily's Original brand of necromancy.

Theory aside, actually looking at two complete similar and equally emotionless faces lined up like this... yeah, it gave me the creeps.

"I'm honestly still surprised you managed to get your hands on these things."

"Same here, I could only say I was lucky." *Like, suuuper lucky*, Lily's smile seemed to imply.

Who knows, maybe she dove into an ancient ruins dungeon during her training trip in Avalon. She was still keeping it a secret though, so I decided not to pry; not that she'd tell me anything.

"Oh, I get it now. With your own homunculi to research on, you were able to figure out what Sarii must be."

"Correct."

To put it all together, White Sacrament had used a girl homunculus as a base to raise it into their 7th Apostle. Having succeeded in that, they made Sarii, her

memories sealed away, act as a proxy for their God.

“Kurono-san, do you pity Sariel?” Fiona asked sheepishly.

“I’ve gone through similar stuff after all, can’t say I don’t——”

If everything we said here turns out to be true, then Sariel is just another victim, made to be strung along by those villains. I couldn’t say if she was exactly like me, did a homunculus have family, friends? Did she have a life before it all? I didn’t know. But I did know that the trials and experiments she must’ve went through were cruel and merciless.

I had managed to escape, but Sariel had been made to complete those mad experiments to the very end. She’d likely gone through experiments so vicious, I couldn’t begin to imagine.

“—— Still, it doesn’t matter.” I recalled what I did. Of course, I’d never forgotten, but had subconsciously kept those thoughts away, closed my eyes from them.

“I’ve killed others like me before. I was made to in the experiments. Even when the completed ones, the Hundred Numbers, appeared on the road to Galahad, I never once hesitated.”

Lily said,

“You had no choice, Kurono. Killing them was the right thing to do.”

to which Fiona followed,

“She’s right. They were all beyond saving.”

They weren’t just saying it to be nice, they were trying to convince me that it was the truth.

And why wouldn’t it be? They were in fact beyond saving. I had to kill them, or they’d kill me. What reason did I have to regret it? —— I had to keep thinking like that, or else, I might as well break down.

“I killed them. I didn’t want to, but I did. But that doesn’t mean I can carry that weight, it doesn’t mean I’ll swear to save them next time. If it comes to it...”

I firmed my resolve

“I’ll kill as many as it takes.”

Hope and ideals don’t save anyone.

Everything has an order of priority, even lives. I had to drive it into my head that to save the ones I truly care about, I might just need to sacrifice everything else.

“Sariel is the Commander-in-Chief of the Crusader army. Without her dead, the battle can’t end. So I won’t show mercy, no matter how much she’s suffered. I’ll kill her, by any means, by my own hands.”

“And to do that,” Lily stared to me gravely,

“are you really willing to do anything, no matter how cowardly?”

“I am. Lily, I think I understand what your plan is now.”

Break the seal on Sariel’s memories.

Reawaken the days filled with nothing but pain and cruelty, gouge into the trauma that is the White Sacrament’s many trials that led to her creation. It was a merciless plan, inhumane I could say.

“It’s unknown what sort of memories she has in there, but I’m sure that if we can break a lock that tight, she’s bound to lose her sanity right there, if only for a moment.”

Lily surmised.

“And that moment, will be our chance to finish her.”

Fiona followed in closing.

It wasn’t a complicated plan, despite everything.

But we of all people were painfully aware how difficult it was to find that one moment of weakness for an Apostle. This was doubly so for someone as mechanically calm and collected as Sariel.

Which brings us to the all-important question: “So, how exactly are we going to break that Mind Protect anyway?”

“That,” Lily exclaimed,

“that was the hardest thing to figure out. I’ve told you how my Telepathy isn’t strong enough, right? That means we need another way.”

“Another way...” I thought on that. Ultimately, nothing came up, “any ideas on that?”

“We use a magic item,” *of course*, Fiona said as if it was obvious, and to pass along the conversation, she chided,

“And I’m sure our intelligent Lily-san knows exactly the thing we need?”

“What we need, is a magic item that can affect the mind, a very powerful one. Now, one can’t find something so convenient just lying around...”

Lily gave me a knowing look,

“but what if we had just the right material to make one?”

A material that tampers with the mind. It could even be some part of a monster specialized in parasitising—

“Sloth Gill!” I shouted in realization, earning a cute fairy smile and applause from Lily.

“You should know very well how tenacious that parasite was.”

Lily grinned.

“We make an item using it’s body as material, and I have no doubt it will destroy the calm right out of Sariel.”

For an instant, the thought struck me that maybe Mia-chan set the Sloth Gill as my third Trial for this very reason.

Was he really pulling the strings, or was it just a coincidence? I guess it doesn’t matter.

“That, just might work.” I said, almost excitedly.

“Sure, but it won’t be easy,” Fiona brought me back to reality, “It’ll work, but only if we can make use of it.”

If the critical magic item gets destroyed in battle, or if Sariel simply dodges it,

we'd get nowhere fast.

"In other words, we need to make sure it hits."

"Yes, and we'll have to count on formation Anticross to make that possible."

Still, having that extra trump card can make all the difference. Without it, we'd have to rely on only Anticross to finish her off. Anticross completely depended on the combined use of our divine protections, and there's no telling how long that can last in the middle of battle.

But with this plan, we'll have the goal of weakening her until we can hit her with a super effective magic item.

We would soon be taking on a Lich quest to field test formation Anticross. After that, we'll know exactly how powerful it is, and we'll also get an idea as to how long we can continuously use it.

"Anyway," Lily took over,

"I thought hard about what shape this mind breaking magic item needs to be, and the best one I can think of is, well, a bullet."

Telepathy, she explained, is a magic that operates on invisible waves of mana. These waves got weaker with distance and could also be shielded from with different means.

This implies that the magic will have the greatest effect if the caster can touch the target directly.

"We don't necessarily need it to pierce her body, a simple touch will be more than enough."

So rather than make it inconspicuous like a needle, we can use make it a bullet and use the speed granted via my Bullet Arts.

Genius, she was absolutely right.

"Although, I have some doubts whether you'll have enough stamina to make the shot right after Anticross ends, so..." said Lily, in her bountiful wisdom, "I'd like to have some insurance."

Perplexed, I repeated the word, "... Insurance?"

“Yes, in other words— — we can rely on a specialist, someone who can make sure a bullet finds its mark. Any ideas?”

And so, the plan was set. Our anti-Sariel battle plan.

It required a number of things: all divine protections granted to Element Masters, a magic item in the shape of a bullet, and a master sniper to make it all work.

As for the person himself... well, I'll just have to beg him with all my might until he accepts.

Chapter 401: An Invitation for a Date



The 5th of Gloom. It was the day that Spada announced to its people that their neighbor, Daidalos, have been conquered by those known as the Crusaders, that these new enemies have begun advancing towards Spada, and that the country is to promptly ready itself for the coming war.

Of course the public was confused. Who are these Crusaders? What happened to Dragon King Garvinal? Such questions were on everyone's minds. But that didn't delay their preparations. Spada, the long standing shield of the city-states of Pandora, was all but used to war by now.


Be it Daidalos or this new army of Crusaders, Spada as a whole rallied itself on the sole intent of giving no leeway to any invading army. No enemy shall step one foot on Spada soil.

This fiery rapture was reflected perfectly within the guild building located inside the noble echelon of the Capital.


For it was on this day that an emergency quest had been issued.


 Emergency Quest 

Join Gladiator in the War for Spada

 Reward: Temporary wages of a Knight. Bonuses granted, based on exploits.

 Duration: Unfixed

 Client: 52nd Ruler of Spada. King Leonhart Tristan Spada

 Details: Gather, adventurers, brave and mighty. For glory, for victory, for Spada!

The contents were the same as with the regular wars with Daidalos.

The details were left sparse, but any adventurer knew the gravity of a quest offered by a king.

In other words, once they agree to join and are made members of the Gladiator regiment, only then will they receive the full details. Adventurers

knew that this was the norm for emergency quests petitioned by the state, and so didn't question it.

But the rush was indeed real.

"Yes! Next please!" Cried Erina, having finally been transferred to the main guild branch and cementing her position as a true elite receptionist, the elven woman was busy frantically processing her own endless line of adventure-seeking clients.

But even this storm-like influx of work could be called meager. After all, she need only deal with adventurers of rank 4 and above. She imagined that at her previous post, at the academy branch, it must be total chaos.

"I'm here for the emer——"

"You'll be taking the emergency quest, yes!" She easily cut off the man, with her usual business smile, and unusually fast pace of work. "I'll need your guild card, please!"

What did it matter that the man before her had his face hidden behind an iron mask and looked unquestionably dubious with his all black garb? She didn't have time for that, she had work to do. Normally, she'd at least do a once or twice over on such a suspicious individual, but now she only cared if the card he gave her was forged or not. No? Then on to the next one.

While fiddling with the specialized card reading ball, she confirmed the man's basic info. Rank 4, Class is Samurai, Name, Rud—— the rest she didn't care to put into memory.

"—— Alright, there you have it. For further details, please head to the meeting room on the 2nd floor. They're holding sessions every hour, please do attend. And that's it. Good luck, and fight the good fight!"

Yes, next please—— she'd settled into a flow. Bidding sayonara to the masked samurai, Erina was determined to blitz through all her clients.

But the adventurer that stepped forth next all but derailed that perfect pace of hers.

"Hey there, Erina. I'm back from Asbel." Large, broad, and wearing the devil's

black coat. A face that could send chills all over Spada. But on the inside, he was a simple, kind young man. A man that Erina recognized. A man she always waited for. A man she was awfully fond of.

“Kurono-kun!!?” But how—— she quickly swallowed back the question that held not one ounce of importance. Kurono was a rank 5 adventurer, he had taken on the quest to subjugate the Lust Rose, and having accomplished that, he had returned to the guild, that being the apt thing to do. Actually, with the new emergency quest out, any and every adventurer was bound to turn up, so he would too, obviously.

“We Element Masters will take the emergency quest.” Her black-garbed beloved said rather coldly, with a tone sharper than his usual. He presented three guild cards, one for each member in his party.

With his too serious demeanor, Erina could only comply. She speedily completed her task as a receptionist without any mistake. Processing took no time at all.

“There, all done, you have the quest.”

“Thanks.”

Erina couldn’t help but have her eyes be stolen by his dark smile. He, Kurono, seemed dashing as ever in her eyes.

Captivated, she felt her heart, deep within her rather ample (for an elf) chest, beat more aggressively.

“Er, Erina, I know you’re busy, but would you be willing to...”

Wait, eh, is what I think is happening, really happening right now—— Erina had already began panicking to no end. His serious stare, his red and black dichromatic eyes held her in place. She could only stare back and nothing else.

Was it finally her time? Her hopes were rising boundlessly.

A brief silence. Kurono, for the smallest of moments, shut his eyes in consideration before reopening them to continue his words: “... go on a date, with me.”

“Happy to oblige!” She saw the chance and jumped for it. Instantly leaving her

seat, Erina grasped Kurono's hand with both of hers.

And seeing him dumbfounded just as instantly, her mood sank in regret. She'd messed up, she was so happy, she'd messed up big time.

"Uh great, thanks."

Joy, utter bliss. The soft, warm smile on Kurono's chiseled visage made her rejoice in victory inside her heart. *Glory to the Black Gods! Yes! Yes! Yesss!!* She appeared an elf, but her heart was as excitable as a beastkin in breeding season.

"C-can we go, now?" In her bottomless elation, Elite Receptionist Erina had splendidly stuttered her words. And that would be the height of embarrassment for one such as her, if not for the fact that her fervor didn't even allow the courtesy.

"Yeah, I was thinking the sooner the better, but can you really go right now?"

"Sure I can! No problem here, I'm all set!" She was out of control. Was she really any different from the many charmed male students who came to her to quests and always left beet red?

"G-got it... then I'll be right outside."

"Okay! I'll be right there, Kurono-kun! You have to wait, okay, Kurono-kun!"

And now her manner of speaking had become childlike. But that didn't stop Erina from finishing her work with the force of a gale.

The moment Kurono left her counter, Erina pinned up a sign that read : This counter is closed for the day, leaving the pitiful fellow next in line going 'Oh man, and just when it was finally my turn!' She dashed for the back room, heading directly for her boss.

She barged into the guildmaster's office as if to almost break down the door and she proclaimed:

"Sir, I shall now head off to capture (rope in) the infamous Nightmare Berserker!"

The aged guildmaster, for his part, answered the rude and excitable young receptionist, rather jovially: "Splendid, fight the good fight now, Erina-kun!"

The agreeable old man readily signed off on Erina's request for early leave, and as a bonus, he even handed her a dubious vial containing a potion of morjura extract.

Lily and Fiona had reached Spada 3 days after Kurono's expedited arrival, that is to say, on the 4th of Gloom.

They'd been worried about Kurono, worried if he'd do something reckless. But upon their return, they'd found him steadily making preparations for the war; he welcomed them calmly. They figured that Prince Wilhart played a large role in convincing him to not act rashly.

And after Kurono finished relaying the news, they too were convinced that the situation wasn't as dire as Crusader troops marching into Spada immediately or having done so already.

Both girls felt relief at the fact that it wasn't like Alzas at least. They still had time.

While the Crusaders kept busy thawing their path of approach, they would have time to sharpen their weapons, replenish their potions, they would have that time to do what needed to be done.

Which was why Kurono was able to remain calm. It was also why Lily made a peculiar suggestion:

"— Hey Kurono, this might be a good time to go greet your friends, we could be gone for a while."

Lily wasn't being snide, not in the least. Kurono didn't have many friends. For that matter, he also had very few acquaintances. But he did have some.

He had in fact spent more than three months attending the Royal Academy. He was acquainted with his teachers and even a few people he got to know at the cafeteria and canteen. There were also those like Eddie and Sienna, a pair of trainee knights he'd met while taking care of bandits.

"... I guess that's true." Kurono made a vague, gloomy expression as he agreed.

Both Alzas and Iskia had happened so suddenly, he never got to consider the

little things. He had been ready to fight to the end in either case, and he was ready this time too.

But this difference in the level of urgency, in knowing that it was, not immediately, but in a near future, that he'd have to brave his deathly battles, even Kurono felt a bit sentimental. And Lily understood that. Looking at him, for once, not impatient, but in a melancholic calm, even without her telepathy, Lily could recognize how Kurono felt.

Thus, she proposed that he go make the rounds to his friends and companions, give his thanks and goodbyes before their departure, bring closure to the low rumbling emotions.

Fiona, who begrudgingly kept quiet as Kurono talked to the elf receptionist, also understood that he needed this closure—

“Er, Erina, I know you're busy, but would you be willing to... go on a date, with me.”

Right up until he voiced those words.

حرق أعدائنا، سحقنا، ممتز، ضربة قاسية الحارقة
(Rise O Hammer of Scorch, char,
rend, obliterate my foe)
——Ignis Brea——”

“Stoop, right there, Fiona.” Lily barely managed to stop the enraged witch as she had abruptly began reciting a dangerous aria while simultaneously withdrawing Spitfire from her sub-space handbag with the skill of a veteran samurai.

It helped that Fiona, who looked like a lovely young lass in her white, ultra-high class one-piece dress (a gift from Kurono), and Lily, who also looked like a lovely little girl hugging said lass from the side, didn't at all seem like the type of people who had almost reduced a beautiful guild receptionist to ashes.

“Lily-san,” Fiona intoned dangerously, “did you not hear what Kurono-san said just now?”

Her hand still inside her sub-dimensional handbag, Fiona looked down at Lily with glazed, golden eyes. It was the same face she displayed to a certain foolish

brat in an Avalon city alleyway as she beat his face in with her staff.

“I did. What of it?” Lily replied simply.

“It means we must——”

“Fiona,” Lily, who was physically being looked down on, looked back at the witch mockingly, as if the woman had lost her marbles,

“How about you trust our Kurono a little bit more?”

“What... what, are you saying...”

“Fufu, forgive me.” Lily giggled, deciding that she had no more cause to hold Fiona back, she retreated a step back.

“I suppose that was a bit mean of me, with how I can use telepathy and all.”

Gracefully landing a few small steps away, Lily’s own one-piece dress, this one of ancient velvet, was set aflutter.

“Trust in him, Fiona.” Lily spoke with such a bold confidence that Fiona, who in contrast had blown her fuse, couldn’t help but blink confoundedly. “You don’t need to fear about *anything* happening.”

“But, but he... Kurono-san, with another girl, he...” *asked her on a date*, Fiona refused to let those accursed words out of her lips.

The small fairy regarded the panicking witch with eyes that belied kindness, perhaps even a hint of affection. Lily spoke the revelation Fiona very much needed:

“If you’re that worried, you only need to secretly follow them.”

“Of course. I will do that.” Fiona accepted the fairy’s guidance that deemed stalking a couple on their date as the ideal course of action. She could keep an eye on them, and forcefully put an end to things if the situation was to turn sour. The meager but very real sense of control gave her peace of mind. This really was the ideal plan, she thought.

“Just, don’t do anything rash? I don’t think that girl will try anything funny, and we’ll only have more problems if you intervene for no good reason.”

Lily gave her a last stern warning, before returning to her usual cheer,

“anyway, just trust him, alright? Stay quiet and let them do their thing. You do that, and I assure you, it’ll be for the best.”

A smile so sweet and lovely, anyone would be charmed at first sight. And yet, looking back at that same smile, Fiona felt a faint chill on her back as she thought: *Yep, that’s Lily-san for you. She’s one hell of a woman to reckon with.*